

SEALS

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Between speech and music: a look at phonetic variation in Sumtu Chin ritual chanting

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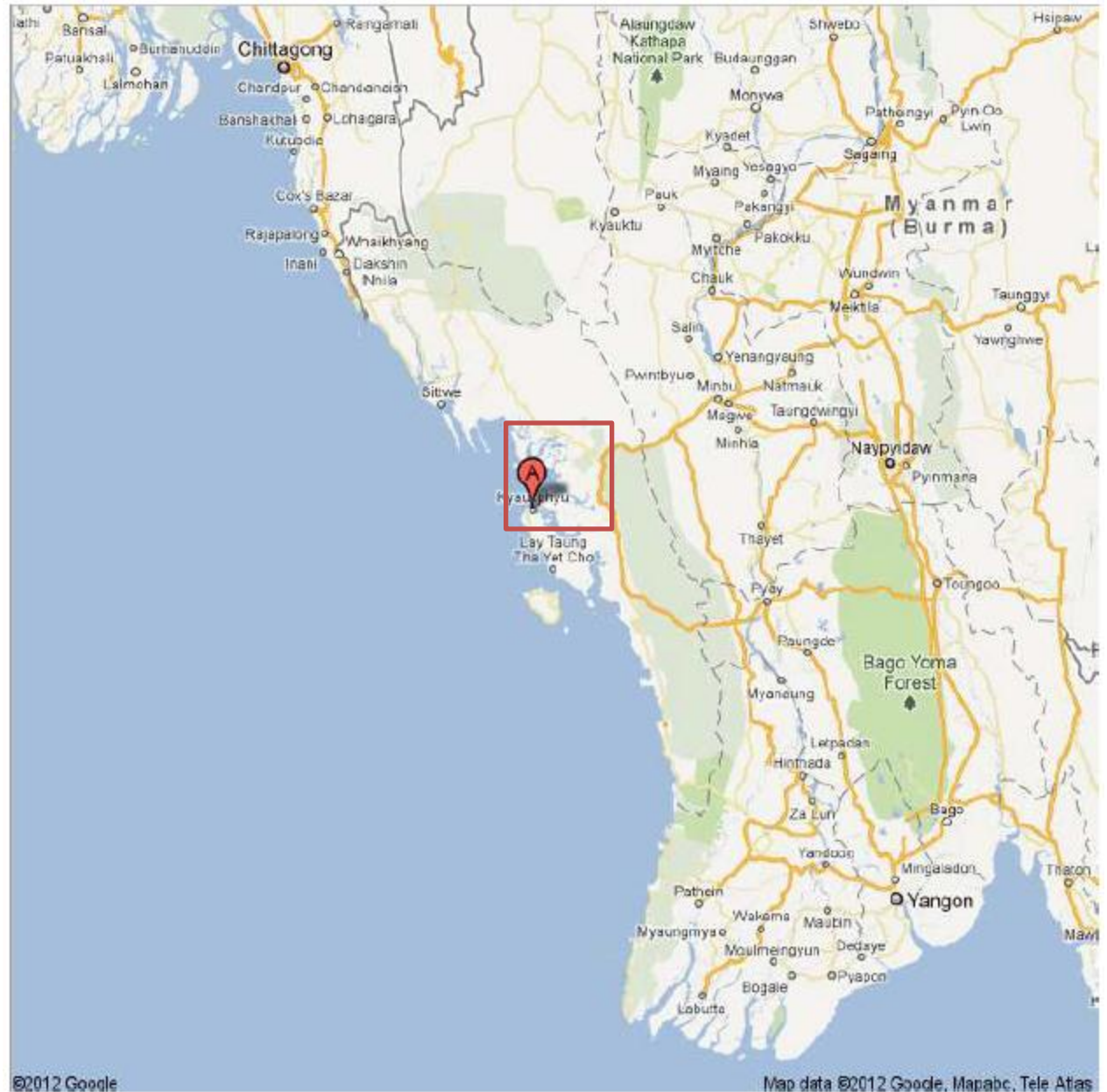


Sumtu basics

- Tibeto-Burman
 - Kuki-Chin-Naga
 - Southern Chin
- c. 2800 households in three townships
- total speaker population probably c. 20,000
- closest language to Sumtu listed in the SIL Ethnologue is Asho Chin, unintelligible to Sone-Tu speakers.

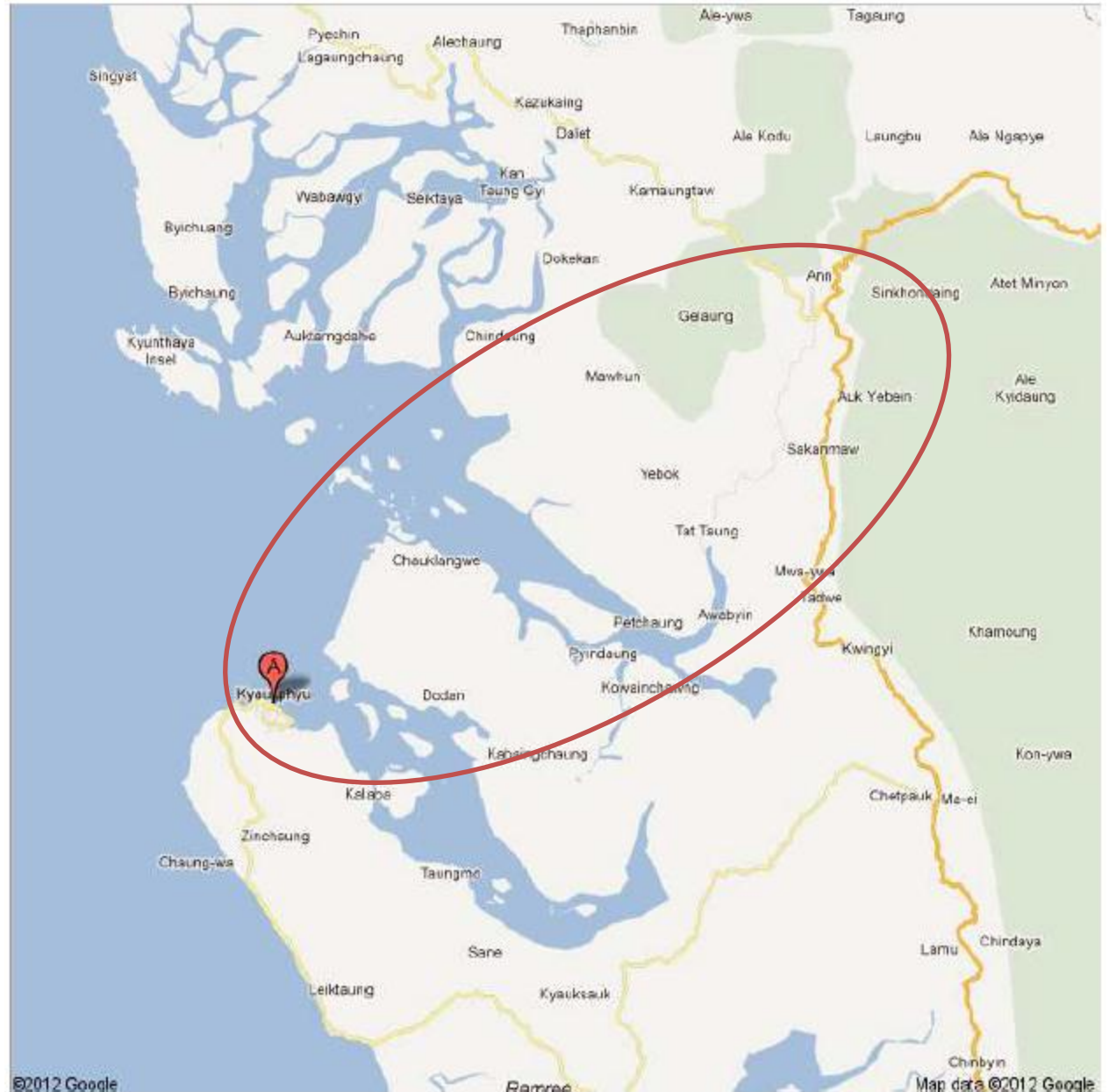


Arakan State,
western
Burma/Myanmar





ARAKAN STATE

- Kyaukphyu
 - Ann
 - Myebung
- townships



Phonetic features of southern Chinese languages

- complex tone systems with intra-phrasal tone sandhi (as yet largely undescribed)
- speech samples  

Ritual Sumtu

- a form of Sone-Tu unintelligible to Sone-Tu speakers
- retains rich Sumtu lexicon now replaced by Arakanese/Burmese loans in the spoken language
- used in animist rituals and performances
 - life events (births, deaths, marriages) as well as
 - festivals, harvests and other community occasions
- now in decline
 - Kyaukpyu and Ann townships overwhelmingly Baptist
 - traditional practices survive to some extent in only in Minbya and Myebon
- soon to disappear, performed only by 3 spirit mediums all over 75

speaker U Hla Sein ဦးလှစိန်

- 75 years old
- from Kyaukpala village
- Myebon dialect


t̪ɕai han pɔ spirit medium

specialising in *ʔəɕjam* chanting for social rituals

Khun Yu text

- House blessing ceremony
- 80% ritual Sumtu, 20% colloquial
- about 30 minutes
 - Part 1: general prayer
 - Part 2: ritual-specific content
- c. 200 lines of varying length, metre and melody
- not (yet) transcribed or translated

investigating the text

- segmented into breath phrases
 - mean breath 8.5s
 - longest 17.9s 
 - audible deep breaths between breath phrases

Features of early lines

- dotted rhythm (mean 2:3 ratio)
- extended final syllable (c. 1:4 ratio)
- monotone c. 190 Hz (F#3) on long sylls
- pitch diversions on some shorter sylls
 - falls from a perfect fifth higher
 - rises from a fourth lower

Features of later lines

- Punchier, sounds 'urgent' –a lot more story to get through 🔊
- extended final syll / rise + glottal (end of text section?) 🔊
- Sometimes abandons rhythm, hurrying up 🔊

Next steps

- transcription / translation
- establish function of phonetic features
 - performance effect
 - content-related
 - dictated by structure of text
 - part of memorisation process

Further research

- Status of chanted texts
 - between speech and music
 - Between ethnomusicology / linguistics / anthropology
- Much work remains

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